

VZCZCXR08397
RR RUEHDBU RUEHLN RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHYE #0194/01 0541406
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 231406Z FEB 07 ZDS
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4931
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 1202
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 0531
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0229
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 0270

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000194

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC AND H

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (ADDED INFO ADDRESSEES)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL OTRA AM

SUBJECT: STAFFDEL TILLEMANN FOCUSES ON DEMOCRATIZATION

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(U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: SFRC Majority Staffmember Tomicah Tillemann visited Yerevan February 18-20, with an eye on Armenia's May elections and MCC eligibility under the "Ruling Justly" category. In a range of meetings with GOAM officials, he made clear that, despite Armenia's many friends on the Hill, Congress will issue no "free passes" on any democratic back-sliding in the context of MCC eligibility. Tillemann was briefed by local interlocutors on readiness for the election, on Armenia's take on Turkish relations, and Armenia's view on issues including the proposed "genocide" resolution in Congress. END SUMMARY

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

¶2. (SBU) Tillemann met in Yerevan with a range of government officials, including Deputy Foreign Minister Armen Kirakossian, Presidential Economic Adviser Vahram Nersissians, Central Election Commission Chairman Garegin Azaryan, Parliament's Foreign Relations Committee Chairman (and ARF-Dashnaksutyun party "bureau" member) Armen Rustamian, and ruling Republican Party board member and Foreign Relations Committee member Samvel Nikoyan. In each of these meetings, Tillemann delivered a clear message: The U.S. Congress would be both unwilling and unable to intervene in the decisions of the MCC Board in the event that Armenia were to hold seriously flawed elections in May 2007, with a concomitant fall in its Freedom House-scored "Ruling Justly" indicators. (COMMENT: From our perspective, this was an extremely valuable and timely message to deliver. We had sensed that many in the GOAM believed that they might well be able to plead for special political help from Congress to save Armenia from the consequences of bad elections or other indicator slippage. END COMMENT)

¶3. (U) Tillemann also met with two journalists (alumni of the Tbilisi-based Caucasus School of Journalism) and with USAID-funded democracy implementers NDI and Counterpart International, during his one business day of consultations in Yerevan, for additional views of Armenia's progress on democratization.

"WE'RE READY"

¶4. (SBU) PRESIDENCY: Taking Tillemann's point about the necessity

for Armenia's May 2007 election to be free and fair, government officials were unanimous in affirming their intention to achieve a higher standard than in past elections. Presidential economic adviser (and former long-time World Bank staffer) Vahram Nersissians said he welcomed rigorous conditionalities on the part of international donors (whether bilateral or from the IMF or World Bank) because these conditions gave him--as an in-house reformer--greater leverage against forces that oppose reform. He said President Kocharian was committed to moving Armenia down the right path, but had to contend with a number of political constraints that hampered rapid progress.

¶ 15. (SBU) CEC CHAIRMAN: Azaryan, accompanied by three other CEC officials, proclaimed that MCC is the least of his reasons for determination to hold clean elections--it's his duty. Azaryan detailed the range of work he and his colleagues had been doing, with the help of U.S. and other international assistance, to get everything ready for the polls. Major work had been done to improve the voters' registry, to install new computer infrastructure, and to train hundreds of pollworkers in electoral law and procedures--though much remained to be accomplished before election day. He noted that the updated voters' registry was already available on the internet for any Armenian voter to verify the accuracy of his or her registration. The CEC was also working on a live television feed capability, so that several television stations would have real-time access to vote tabulations from the lower-level election commissions simultaneously with the CEC's receipt of them. Azaryan was grateful for the generous international assistance which was helping the CEC make positive strides.

¶ 16. (SBU) NATIONAL ASSEMBLY--THE DASHNAKS: Parliament's "Dashnak" party-affiliated chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee strongly agreed with Tillemann's point on the importance of free elections, commenting that this would be Armenia's "last chance" to prove itself capable of meeting international standards for a clean poll. Rustamyan predicted that anything less would lead Armenia into a downward spiral of increasing corruption and entrenched monopolization of power, and would pose a grave threat to Armenia's stability and national security. (COMMENT: Strong rhetoric is a trademark of the maverick and fiercely nationalistic Dashnaks--whose words often seem to belie their role as a part of government. END COMMENT)

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¶ 17. (SBU) NATIONAL ASSEMBLY--THE REPUBLICANS: The more staid and dominant Republican Party was represented by MPs Samvel Nikoyan and Armen Ashotian, who gravely acknowledged Tillemann's points and said the ruling party was doing everything it could to do a better job. Nikoyan detailed the National Assembly's intensive consultations with OSCE/ODIHR and Council of Europe Venice Commission experts to draft the best election code possible. He highlighted the new code's explicit provisions for accredited international and domestic observers and political party proxies to have unquestioned access to observe every aspect of the vote-counting process--even to the extent of allowing videotaping of the tabulation procedures. They averred that framework is in place to achieve fully free and fair elections; the only missing ingredient is mutual trust between ruling and opposition parties, who must work together in the election commissions.

¶ 18. (SBU) THE REPUBLICAN, PART DEUX: Nikoyan and Ashotian expressed confidence that the Republicans can trounce the opposition in a completely fair contest, and had no need to resort to vote-rigging to secure the leading position in the new parliament. They repeated, however, previously-expressed GOAM talking points about the need for greater "transparency" from the OSCE Election Observation Mission. They bemoaned the OSCE's unwillingness to set up a real-time alert system to immediately report any perceived flaws or violations to GOAM officials during the run-up to elections and on election day itself, so that corrective action could be taken right away. PolOff explained that the OSCE had traditionally been extremely reluctant to take such an active role in policing election procedures, for fear of getting drawn into partisan disputes or of compromising its role as simply an unbiased witness on behalf of the international community.

ARMENIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS

¶9. (SBU) Though he delivered the same message on free elections and MCC eligibility, Tillemann's conversation with DFM Kirakossian focused mostly on Armenia's relationship with Turkey. The only way to detoxify the bilateral climate was for Turkey to demonstrate its seriousness about reconciling with Armenia. The GOAM very much wanted to diversify and integrate regional trade and investment, and enjoy the fruits of normal neighbor relations.

¶10. (SBU) Kirakossian noted the different priorities that the GOAM and politically-active Armenian Diaspora organizations bring to the public policy debate. While for many Diaspora organizations "genocide" was the single preeminent issue, the GOAM had a range of national interests it must weigh. However, the Diaspora had been and continued to be an invaluable help to Armenia economically and politically, especially during the mid-1990s when Armenia had been in crisis. Kirakossian observed that Greek Diaspora organizations in the U.S. had once been profoundly hostile to Turkey, but with the advent of warmer bilateral relations between Greece and Turkey, the Greek-American lobby had quieted considerably. He implied that, therefore, Turkey's best way to defuse Armenian Diaspora rage would be to get seriously engaged in settling its disagreements with the Republic of Armenia. Kirakossian indicated that good faith steps from the Turkish side would be met with a positive response from Yerevan. Both Kirakossian and Nersissiants told Tilleman that Armenia's highest priority with Turkey was to break the isolation and to open the border.

¶11. (SBU) PARLIAMENT WEIGHS IN: Republican party MPs Nikoyan and Ashotian were even more forthcoming on the Turkey issue. Nikoyan declared that if Turkey were to open the door to Armenia "even just a crack" Armenia was ready to walk through that door to establish good-neighbor relations, without preconditions. Nikoyan also described his own efforts to build rapprochement on a personal level with Azerbaijanis, and set a climate in which peace over Nagorno-Karabakh could take root. He had himself hosted an Azerbaijani member of parliament (an acquaintance from the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE) in Armenia, taking the visiting MP on a visit to the Azerbaijani's birth village, which is in Armenia. He reported that the visitor--ostensibly an enemy--had been warmly welcomed by Armenians. Nikoyan said, however, that his Azerbaijani friend had cautioned him against trying to visit Azerbaijan, where his safety would be in jeopardy.

¶12. (U) Staffdel Tillemann has cleared on this message.

GODFREY